

Writing College Admissions Essays

A. The three basic types of college essay questions:

The "YOU" question—

"Tell us about yourself . . ."

"Please complete a one page personal statement and submit it with your application."

"How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?"

The "WHY US" question—

"Why is [insert college] a good college choice for you?"

"Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study."

Please tell us about your immediate goals and your commitment to [insert college]"

The "CREATIVE" question—

"What would you put in a time capsule?"

"What national issue do you regard is important?"

"What famous person do you respect and admire?"

"Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others."

"Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence."

B. How to answer each question:

The "YOU" question —

- reveal your personality, insight, commitment
- the danger is it's open-ended, so stay focused
- find just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities
- avoid the urge to spill everything

The "WHY US" question —

- the focus is provided, so it should be clear enough to you since you probably went through some kind of selection process
- make sure you know your subject [the college] well

The "CREATIVE" question —

- you have something to react to, to show your real views
- write an informed essay
- use common sense (when thinking how creative to get)
- be creative, but not wacky; this may be too risky

C. Writing Tips:

Dos

- keep your focus narrowed and personal
 - prove a single point or thesis
 - your introduction should reveal your focus
 - too comprehensive waters it down
 - it's not about telling the committee what you've done (they can get this from your list of activities)

--it's about showing them who you are

--prove it

--develop your main idea w/ vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons; don't just state your point-of-view, let your idea unfold in the details

Okay: "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."

Better: "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

--be specific

--avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details

Okay: "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of like through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."

Better: "My mom and dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

Don'ts

- don't tell them what you think they want to hear

- they all ready know all about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor

- bring something new to the table

- don't write a resumé

- don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application; this is not an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list.

- don't use 50 words when five will do

- eliminate unnecessary words

Okay: "Over the years it has been pointed out to be by my parents, friends, and teachers — and I have even noticed this about myself, as well — that I am not the neatest person in the world."

Better: "I'm a slob."

- don't forget to proofread

- typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing; your computer's spellchecker will miss common typos.

D. Ten Steps to a Solid Essay

1. Answer the question (or no matter how good the essay is, it will not be good enough)

2. Be original (boring topics can be made to sound interesting)
3. Be yourself (write meaningfully and describe your feelings)
4. Don't thesaurize your composition
5. Use imagery and clear, vivid prose (experiences with supporting details — appeal to the five senses of the reader through the use of concrete language)
6. Spend the most time on your introduction (you want the reader to spend more than the average reading time [1-2 minutes] on your essay)
 - a. don't summarize in your Introduction
 - b. create mystery or intrigue in your Introduction
7. Use transition (it provides the intellectual architecture to argument building)
 - a. not only the usual
 - b. repeat key words to progress your ideas
8. Conclusions are Critical (do not use stock phrases, "In conclusion . . .", etc.)
9. Give your draft to others
 - a. ask editors to look for certain things that you think need work: What is the essay about? Have I used active voice verbs? Is my sentence structure varied? Do you see any clichés? How are my transitions? Do I use imagery often? What's the best part? What's the worst part? What parts are unclear? Is every single sentence crucial? What does the essay reveal about my personality? Could anyone else have written this?
10. Revise, revise, revise (you are only allowed so many words — use them wisely)

"Easy writing makes hard reading." --Ernest Hemingway